

THE CENTENARY OF THE S.V.P.

A hundred years ago eight young law-students of the Sorbonne gathered in the back room of a Paris newspaper office. Tired of decrying the low ebb to which the Faith had fallen in the chaos of the preceding half-century they had decided to put their hopes to the test of action. Under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, whose indefatigable zeal for the poor was not yet forgotten, they constituted themselves into a lay confraternity with the object of achieving their own sanctification through charitable works. Their rule was perfectly simple, in its first article it welcomes all young men anxious to unite in prayer and good work, in the second it states that no work of charity may be regarded as foreign to the aims of the society.

From this modest beginning the Society has grown from strength to strength, so that in May of this year representatives of provincial Councils from the four corners of the earth met in Paris to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the foundation. Instead of merely stirring the youth of France to a proper sense of its responsibility, the Society has come to be one of the most active spiritual organisations for Catholic laymen, and as such perhaps the best example of social action in modern times. Yet because its work is done unobtrusively, it is not as well known as it deserves to be outside the humble homes which enjoy its special care. Yet in the course of a hundred years of diligent activity the society has increasingly shown its ability to cope with the multifarious problems which are not and cannot be dealt with directly by the Church.

The untold stories of thousands of devoted Brothers testify to the complete success of the primary object—self-sanctification. In France alone there is no doubt that the Catholic revival of a century since received a tremendous impetus from the growth of the Society. For the rest of the world pontifical and episcopal letters have repeatedly indicated the approval with which the steady growth of

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Christian charity has been regarded. Working in units of conferences closely associated with the parish priest, who is frequently their chaplain, the Brothers meet each week and after prayers and spiritual reading they arrange their visits to the poor. The sick and the children, whether in schools or institutions, are their principal concern. A secret collection enables the Brothers to assist the more urgent needs of their charges, but it is the spiritual end which prompts and motivates all their activities and distinguishes their work from the many otherwise excellent organisations engaged in philanthropic work.

The Centenary Celebrations in May centred round the Carmelite Church in Paris where lies the body of Frederic Ozanam, the founder and principal organiser of the Society. Nothing could be more fitting than that the assembled members of the society should meet in the old university quarter which saw the first activities of the eight young Brothers. It was the constant cry of Ozanam that *young Catholics* could and would save the world, and it is to be hoped that the celebrations may help to carry his message to the younger generation which is struggling to-day with a very similar situation.

A hundred years ago France was suffering much as we are from the aftermath of war. Materially, politically and spiritually it was reeling from the impact of a revolutionary change; the lack of faith in God and in human nature with which we are familiar prompted one energetic and ambitious young man to take action. Ozanam, attention to whose life has increasingly grown in recent years, has been proved to have possessed unusual faith both in God and his creatures. The son of a provincial doctor, he learnt the lesson of charity from the tireless devotion of his parents to the poor of Lyons. At an early age he determined to devote his life to good work, and though the S.V.P. was by no means the only organisation which he stimulated, its success naturally tends to belittle his other activities. But since they help to form his life it will not, perhaps, be fruitless to consider them.

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Ozanam was born in 1813 and he was not more than twelve when Saint-Simon died, yet in another six years he had progressed so far with his studies that he published his *Réflexions sur la doctrine de Saint-Simon*, in which he successfully criticised the fundamental premises of that 'science of progress' which lies at the root of Saint-Simonian Liberalism. Politics and history had absorbed his youthful interests, but when he moved to Paris to complete his studies he was first discouraged and then inspired by the prevailing chaos. Under the guidance of Ampère and Ballanche he soon became devoted to the school of Chateaubriand. His studies of medieval Europe indicate an understanding which alone would have earned him fame as an apologist of the Church, while his enthusiastic book on Dante contributed more than any other to the revival of interest in medieval learning and philosophy.

But successful studies and the steady progress of the S.V.P. were insufficient for his boundless energy. The practice of the law grew distasteful to him and he felt that his work as a professor of literature at the Sorbonne was not fulfilling his desire to lead a full life. At an early stage of his life in Paris Ozanam had felt the influence of Lacordaire, indeed he had helped to promote it by organising a petition to the Bishop of Paris requesting that the young Abbé who was so sympathetic to the difficulties of the younger generation should preach a series of sermons at Notre Dame. After the death of his parents, Ozanam turned over in his mind the question of a priestly vocation, and for a time there seemed to be a likelihood of his following Lacordaire to Rome. He had welcomed the *Mémoire sur la Rétablissement* as a voice calling to his restive spirit and had asked his friend to send him a copy of the Constitutions, but he was never to don the habit of St. Dominic. He was advised by his confessor to pursue his vocation in the world. His position was unique and his influence from the chair at the Sorbonne enabled him to do inestimable work as the leader of an international crusade.

The motto now was ' Be Saints in order to make Saints. Conferences were growing up on all sides and the membership amounted to more than a thousand. Ozanam was both the guiding spirit and driving force. Visionary and yet realist, he pursued his vocation unremittingly; teaching, writing and organising he exhausted his slender physical powers by the intensity of his application. But when he died at the age of forty-two he had achieved his object. France was Catholic. And this change was voluntary and spontaneous, it was not the result of imposition, a truly social transformation inspired by the good instincts which Ozanam had the vision to see latent in the people around him while still a boy.

Credit for this achievement was withheld from Ozanam in the busy times which followed his death, but of late years his claims have received increasing attention. The parallel between his difficulties and ours has been drawn repeatedly. His methods are still practicable and with the experience of a hundred years which the Society enjoys there would seem to be no limit to the possible scope of an organisation which is pledged to undertake all good works.

There are at present some ten thousand conferences at work in various parts of the world, with a membership of a quarter of a million Brothers. In England there are some eight hundred conferences. But there is room for many hundreds of new members, preferably young men. The fact that the Rules require the Brothers to work unobtrusively need not prevent the spread of the Society's attractions. It is a very common experience to find laymen—particularly among the young, who have more to offer and to gain—in almost complete ignorance of the object of the Society; as often as not they believe that it exists for the sake of distributing food tickets. That such an impression should be prevalent in a time when the necessity for co-operation in all spiritual work is so great is a cause for grave anxiety. There is so much waiting to be done that no channels which may provide valuable assistance can be left unexplored. The Holy Father in his letter to the Pre-

sident-General of the Society has expressed the hope that the centenary will prove an occasion for a great influx of new members to carry on the work of the lay apostolate.

The story of the Society in England goes back to 1844. Among the students who sat at the feet of Ozanam at the Sorbonne was George Wigley, a young English Catholic. Fired by the zeal of his master, Wigley spread the news of the success of the Society on his return to England. Ozanam helped with advice, and on the 24th of January, 1844, twelve Catholic laymen met in the Sabloniere Hotel in Leicester Square. It was then resolved 'that it was advisable that an institution should be formed on the basis of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for London and its vicinity.'

The success of the first conference led to the formation of others, both in London and the provinces. So far from merely distributing relief, the Society engaged in a variety of literary activities; it played the part of sponsor to more than one of the newspapers we are familiar with to-day, and it published the *Clifton Tracts* in defence of the re-establishment of the Hierarchy. Later, under the presidency of Brother George Blount, who directed the Superior Council for nearly half a century, a succession of schemes followed in quick succession—the Catholic Shoeblack Brigade, the Working Boys' Home, the Patronage Committee and then the St. Vincent Home for Destitute Boys which later developed into the Crusade of rescue. Girls were not neglected. A number of ladies' societies following the precedent of St. Vincent's Ladies of Charity were established to take care of the cases the Brothers could not attend.

To-day similar activities cope with contemporary problems. In particular the institution of secretariats composed of experts on legal points, pension schemes, and housing problems is encouraged to solve the difficulties of scattered conferences. As always, it is children who are the special concern of the Brothers; not only is everything done to ensure their material welfare—whether in the home, the school or the holiday camp. Recently the Society has allied

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itself with the Scout Movement. The formation of Catholic troops under the supervision of conferences is an attempt to stop the 'leakage' which starts after the release from school influence.

For this last work alone zealous assistants are badly needed. There can be no doubt that many willing helpers must be forthcoming in this time of stress when 'social service' is a call. There must be hundreds of young men both able and willing to take their share in this work. The young men of France brought about a spiritual revolution a century ago. There is no reason why the young men of England should not achieve as much to-day. Our neighbours turn to us and expect us as Catholics to have a plan. The plan is here, it only wants supporters. Who will answer the call of Ozanam?

HERBERT KILDANY.